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A MISSISSIPPI MOAN
By
Julie Larson McCaughey

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

MFA Imaging Arts/Computer Animation
SCHOOL OF FILM AND ANIMATION
ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
ROCHESTER, NEW YORK
May 2003

Stephanie Maxwell _____

Howard Lester _____

Susan Lakin _____

Permission Denied

A Mississippi Moan by Julie Larson McCaughey

I, *Julie Larson McCaughey*, hereby **deny permission** to the RIT Library of the Rochester Institute of Technology to reproduce my thesis in whole or in part.

Date: September 19, 2003

Julie Larson McCaughey

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I would like to acknowledge the following individuals who made it possible for me to complete A MISSISSIPPI MOAN.

To my husband, Ethan McCaughey, who provided me with unconditional support and patience. Ethan provided wonderful insight and constructive criticism throughout the production process. Without his involvement, I do not believe I would have completed the work.

To my thesis chair, Stephanie Maxwell, who always took time to see new developments and encouraged me when I was doubtful. I value her creative ingenuity and valuable criticism.

This work is dedicated to my mother, Carole Larson, who died in 1991. I know she would have been proud of my accomplishment and cheered me on throughout my education at the Rochester Institute of Technology.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I will address the making of my thesis work, *A MISSISSIPPI MOAN*. During the course of the one-year it took to complete the work, there have been many self-gratifying experiences as well as unanticipated setbacks. The work captures the last moments and memories of an unknown woman who is dying after an automobile accident. The setting is rural and swampy; she is alone. The water that surrounds her carries her into the past and beyond into death as she leaves her mortal life. The dying woman's consciousness is scattered but carried by the water (see Image 1).



The work is fluid in form, yet fragmented in the subjective experience of the dying woman. The work is interpretative, but presents the memories of a soured relationship that is woven with the dying woman's current predicament of facing death and the fluidity of her approaching death in the watery landscape. The work ends with the woman's death and her merging into a watery grave. It is an experimental work which conveys an idea, creates atmosphere and mood, and has a distinct style which all results from experimentation with and manipulation of various techniques and processes. This paper explains my creative process and the actual production of A

MISSISSIPPI MOAN. There are four parts: Pre-Production, Production, Postproduction and Reflection.

PRE-PRODUCTION

In May 2002, I proposed my thesis film to the faculty of the School of Film and Animation. My intention was to create an abstract film with a theme of water, symbolizing the flow of life. The work was proposed as a multi-layered and rhythmical mixed media production. I sought to utilize 3D graphics and animation, digital video, 2D graphics and 8mm film footage. I set out to make a visual poem about a women dying alone in a watery landscape. Initially, I had thought about the late Blues singer, Bessie Smith, and her mythical death resulting from an automobile accident in Mississippi in 1937. I drew upon that tragic incident and a blues song entitled, Muddy Waters (A Mississippi Moan). The title of my thesis work, A MISSISSIPPI MOAN, was taken from Smith s 1927 recording of the song.

At first, I wanted to provoke imagery of the south, particularly the Mississippi Delta region. However, throughout production, my aim diverged and I set upon a new, yet familiar path. I will address

the evolution of my thesis during the production section of this paper. My work became much more than what I had proposed in May 2002.

Three films influenced my proposal. These films stuck with me for many months prior to my proposal to the faculty committee. The first film, *MIRROR OF HOLLAND* (1950), by Dutch filmmaker Bert Haanstra, set forth my fascination with water. Haanstra's inverted camera or upside down cinematography of Holland's River Vecht and the people and life surrounding the river inspired me. I particularly drew upon Haanstra's slowly paced progression from real life reflections into the more graphic watery abstraction of the River Vecht's motion. The River Vecht was the life giving substance of the people and countryside. The watery reflections, or the mirror of Dutch life, also contributed to my desire for an impressionistic aesthetic. I sought to evoke a subjective, harmonic, sensory driven narrative rather than a recreation of objective reality.

The second film, *PONY GLASS* (1997), by American filmmaker Lewis Klahr, was a cut and paste collage-based work produced with contemporary visual icons from American life. Klahr draws heavily from comic books, a media which is my first love, in such a way to also inspire my animation technique. Klahr utilizes the absence of

motion and expressions with staccato motion to weave intense soap opera like narratives with a distinctive American flavor. The Pony Glass is an expressive film that communicates a unique story without the use of seamless animation.

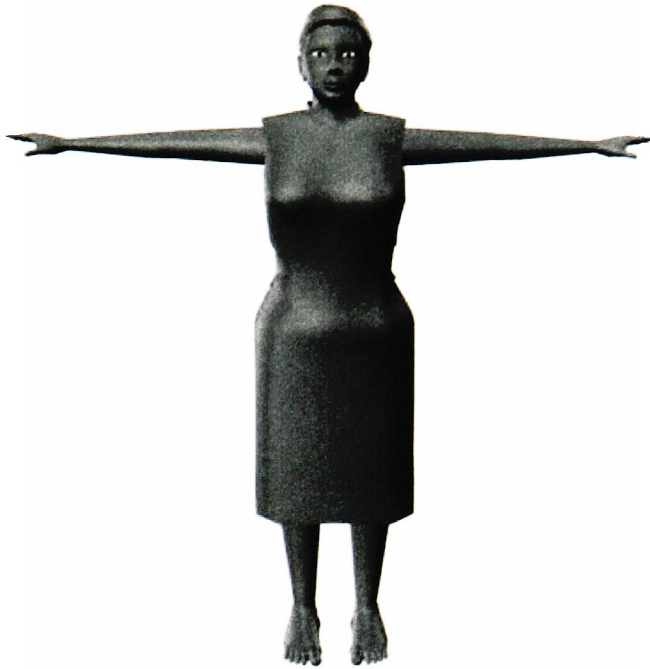
The third and final film that I drew upon for my thesis film, *STUDY IN CHOREOGRAPHY FOR THE CAMERA* (1945) by Ukrainian American filmmaker Maya Deren. Deren manipulated time and space through the fluid motion of dancer, Talley Beattey. It was this union of motion with the disregard for continuity of reality that drew me to Deren's film. I experimented with dance, which I will further detail later, but ultimately did not choose to include dance within my film. However, Deren's film revealed to me the beauty of poetic avant-garde film.

I cannot include storyboards, because I have never utilized sequential images for any of my works. After the faculty board approved my proposal, I set out to produce my work. Instead of storyboarding, I kept a notebook by my bed. Often, I would write ideas that came to me before falling asleep or upon waking. There were many times when ideas would appear as from nowhere, taking me into different directions. The year that I spent producing the work

was fueled entirely by a stream of consciousness. There of course were problems, many times an inconsistency with my proposed work idea, but ultimately, I am very satisfied with the ending result. I decided to listen to myself and to stop questioning what the right side of my brain was telling me.

PRODUCTION

In the summer of 2002, my first step was the production of my lead female character made entirely with Alias Wavefront Maya version 4.5. I had never before created a human figure using 3D software. I first created the face, using a picture of myself as reference. I modeled in polygons, which I am more comfortable using, and intended to convert to Maya's Subdivisions. By the end of the summer, I had finished with the model (see Image 2). The model was rigid in form, but I had intended to apply effects using Adobe After Effects version 5.5 that would ease the hard look and soften her form.



Problems arose when I moved from polygonal modeling to rigging the model for animation. The detail level of the model's surface made it difficult to rig because of the model's complexity. The model was not constructed simply; less is more with 3D models. Once I had finished rigging the model, I attempted animating the figure so I could begin blocking the action. Movement was unrealistic and stiff. The rigging did not produce the effects I needed in order to properly animate the model. The motion of the model added with the hard look of its construction led me to consider other avenues instead of 3D animation.

In the fall quarter of 2002, I began teaching my first undergraduate course at the School of Film and Animation. This class drew heavily upon my time, but I still managed to work on my thesis and look for a new direction. I began producing many of the abstract watery compositions in Adobe After Effects that have been incorporated in my film. During this time, I experimented with many different techniques in After Effects. I truly enjoyed producing many colorful and expressive compositions. I mainly produced blue hued backgrounds symbolizing water and air (see Images 3 and 4). By the end of fall quarter, I had a wealth of compositions to use for my thesis. However, I still did not have a female character, the central role in my narrative.

The following quarter, I taught my second class. I had more time to work on my thesis since the class was smaller and I was more accustomed to teaching. During this time I experimented with dance and 2D still imagery and animation.

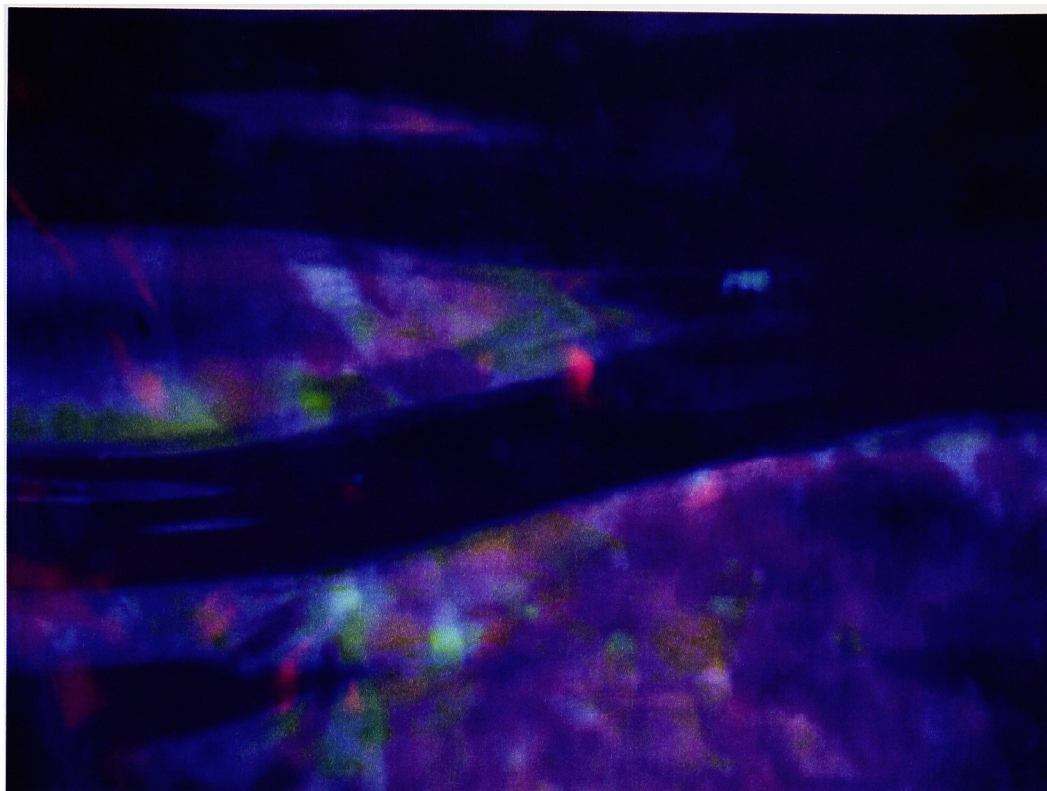


Image 3 above

Image 4 below



After speaking with my thesis chair, Associate Professor Stephanie Maxwell, of the School of Film and Animation, I became interested in pursuing dance as a possible answer to my missing central figure. Professor Maxwell gave me the name of a graduate dance student at the State University of New York at Brockport. I contacted the dancer, Alysha Bright, and she agreed to dance in front of a green screen drop while I shot her performance (see Images 5 and 6) with a DV video camera.



Image 5



Image 6

Ms. Bright proved to be an excellent dancer and I was most impressed with her adaptability to my direction. We screened Maya Deren's *STUDY IN CHOREOGRAPHY FOR THE CAMERA* before beginning the video shoot. Coincidentally and unknown to me, Ms. Bright was an avid admirer of famed dancer and choreographer, Katherine Dunham. Maya Deren worked as an assistant to Katherine Dunham and her dance company and it is here that Deren drew inspiration and skill for her dance films. Ms. Bright and I worked well together and I was able to capture an hour of video footage.

Much of the dance footage left a green residue on Ms. Bright's figure due to the compression of the DV video. DV video is not the optimal medium to utilize green screen techniques, but unfortunately, I could not afford to shoot 16 mm film. I had to make due with the school's DV video camera. I used After Effects to remove the green screen background and incorporate the dance movement into existing compositions. The green residue I affected with filters to produce a halo like effect upon Ms. Bright's figure, which I believe added to the overall aesthetic.

After producing a rough edit of the new footage, I showed the film to my chair, Stephanie Maxwell and in addition the two other members of my thesis board, which included Professor Howard Lester, Chair of the School of Film and Animation, and Susan Lakin, Assistant Professor of the School of Photographic Arts and Sciences. I reflected upon their constructive criticism because unanimously, each believed my work needed much more work and direction. I was unhappy with the addition of the dance footage. Somehow my work moved away from my original proposal and became about dance. As much as I enjoyed and valued Ms. Bright's artistic expression, it was not ultimately a good fit with my work.

Additionally, I did not provoke a southern, Mississippi inspired imagery. I moved away from this original idea because I didn't know the first thing about being a southern woman. As much as the music of Bessie Smith moves me, I am not an African American woman, nor could I know what it is like to be one. I let that idea fall to the wayside.

By February 2003, I was on to a new direction. I began producing 2D drawings of my central figure. This is where I drew upon the work of Lewis Klahr's collages. I searched online for pictures of women from the 1930s. After gaining insight into the fashion and styles of that decade, I drew images of a woman in a green dress. I enjoy drawing still images, but I find sequential images for animation very tiresome and tedious. However, I did animate and produce many shots of this new figure (see Images 7 and 8). I actually liked the drawings, but when I added the hand drawn figure to my compositions, it looked even more out of place than the dance footage. I attempted to make it work; ultimately, I failed again to create a central female figure.

After beginning full time employment in March 2003, I began a new medium of expression. I began utilizing my digital photography

camera. I began by taking pictures of my husband, Ethan McCaughey, as an additional character to the film. In turn, Ethan would take pictures of me, under my direction. I had used this technique for my second film,



Image 7



Image 8

TRANNOSTALGIA (2002), produced at the School of Film and Animation, and I realized I had already practices and been successful with this technique, and it had been eluding me for months. I took multiple shots of one action to produce an animation of digital images. I would open the raw files in Adobe Photoshop version 7 and cut out the background to leave a silhouette of the figure. After adding the first digital image animation to the After Effect

compositions, I knew I was on the right track when I saw the resulting blended image (see Image 9).

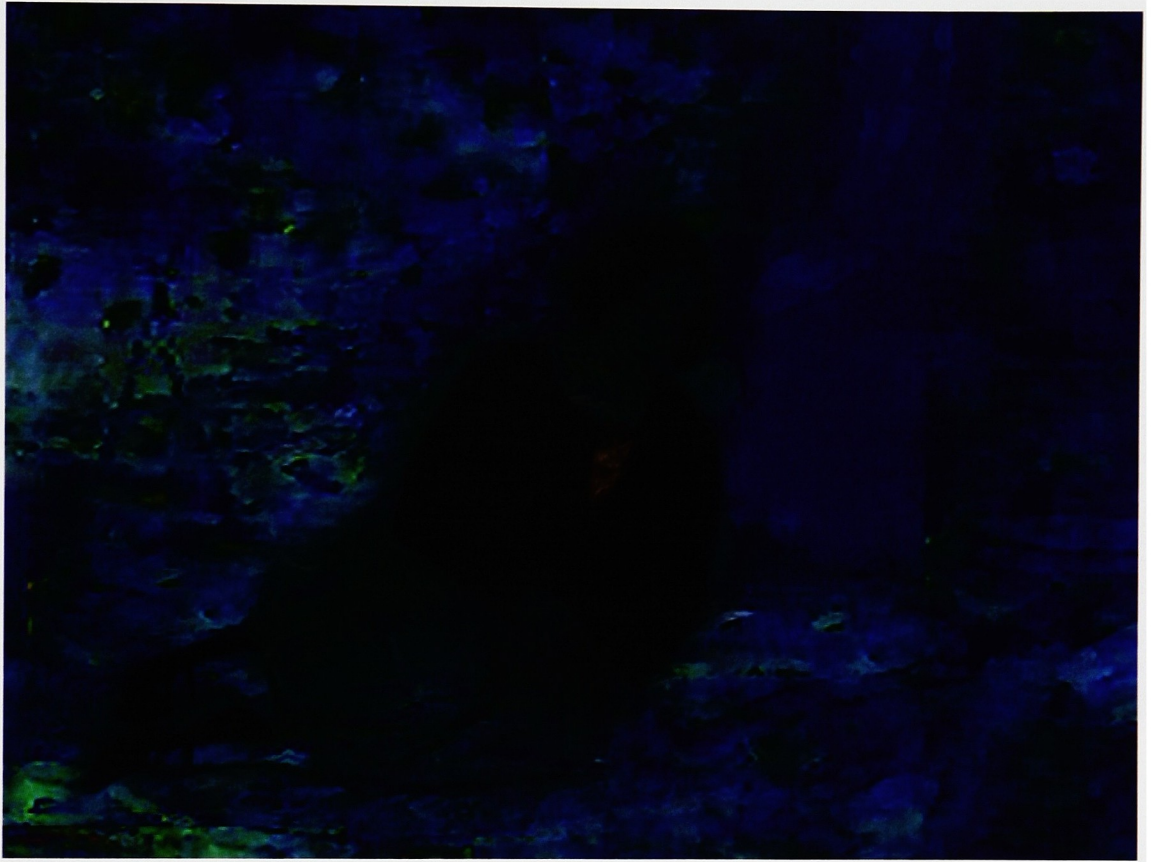


Image 9

I modeled again in Alias Wavefront Maya to produce 3D backgrounds. I produced a 3D apartment complete with a bed, table, cabinet, fireplace and a vitrola. The vitrola added an old time feeling and it was the agent for the diegetic music, in this case, the Bessie Smith song. The song begins playing after the vitrola is introduced to the viewer. This shot is meant to be a memory of a time when the

central female figure was alone and thinking of her past and her present situation with her significant other (see Image 10).



Image 10

After producing numerous digital image animations and incorporating them into compositions, I began piecing together a narrative. I had roamed far at times from my initial proposed film. However, after working to unite the images together, my film took form. Ideas came more easily and my interest in the film was reawakened. Soon, the film was shaped and I began the process of postproduction. The film was produced entirely within Adobe After Effects. I rendered the final composition, which took 2 days to complete at full resolution.

POSTPRODUCTION

Generally I have ideas for sound during pre-production, but I always leave sound for the postproduction stage. I always knew I would incorporate a blues song into the film. I did utilize Bessie Smith's Muddy Waters (A Mississippi Moan). In addition, I used sounds that had a flowing style, but did not overwhelm the imagery. I downloaded free sound loops and manipulated the files in Adobe Premiere version 6. The soundtrack produces a dream like intensity and evokes a mood of transcendence. I wanted to leave the audience on edge by the music, as well as, allure them with the audio as the imagery moves the central female figure from life to death.

REFLECTIONS

Overall, I am satisfied with my thesis work. The imagery focuses the attention of the central female figure's subjective experience before her death. Although I did not evoke an American southern cultural aspect in the film, I think the film is better for it. I remained true to my proposal with the theme of water and the cycle of life. The water theme was always what I was most interested in exploring. The abstract images I created of water are the strongest in the film (see Image 11). I most enjoyed the production process when

I was creating abstract compositions. I never thought I would

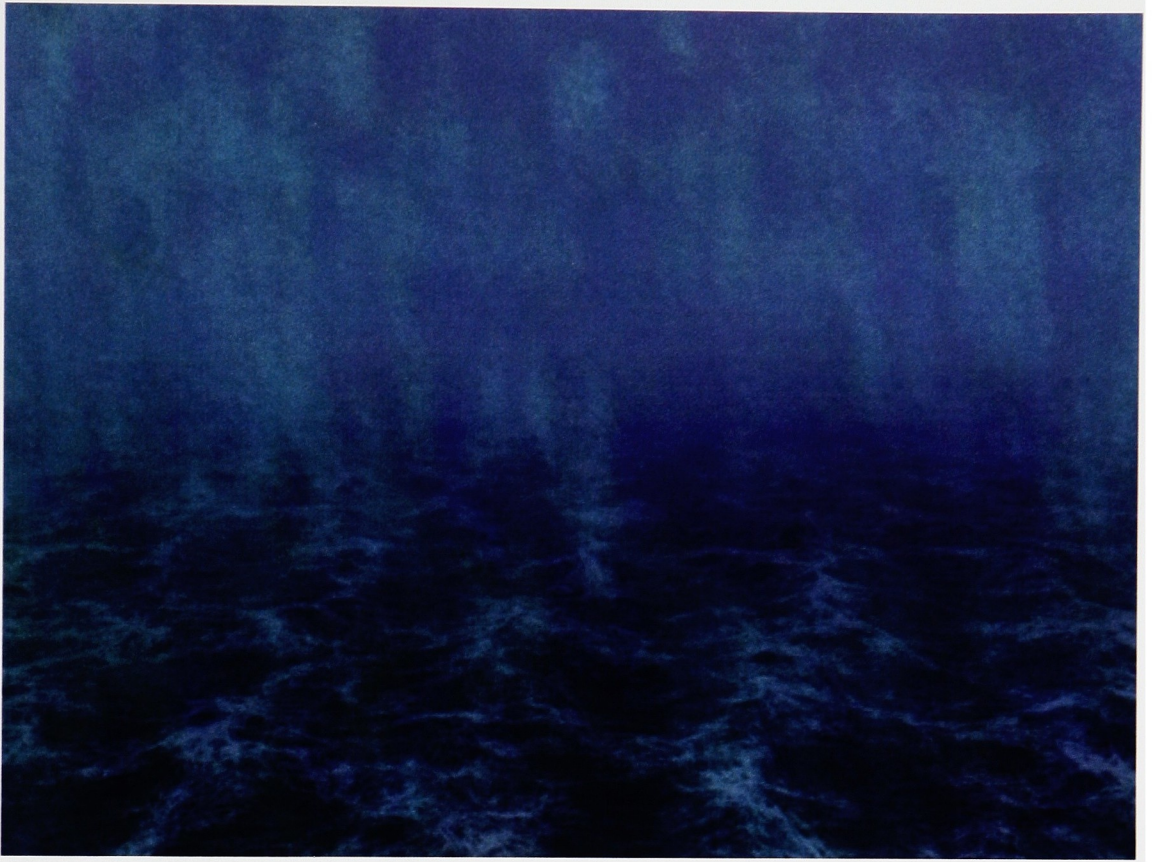


Image 11

be as invested in experimental art as I have grown to be since beginning as a MFA graduate student. When I entered the MFA program, I believed I would make Pixar or Disney like 3D animations. This never materialized.

During this year of development and production, I learned about myself as an artist and how I work best. It was a very rewarding experience for myself and hopefully for viewers as well. My creative process can be hectic due to its spontaneous and fluctuating quality.

I did not storyboard for this work, but I may in the future begin to draw more detailed guides. I have the tendency to wander toward new ideas rather than an established idea and direction. However, I believe I do need some impulsivity when producing a work. I am generally more excited about the work when ideas are fresh. I become bored and often need a new direction in order to complete the work. Boredom can lead to procrastination. I am fortunate that I satisfied my self-imposed deadline of three academic quarters.

I learned throughout this year that I am most comfortable working with Adobe Photoshop and After Effects. Although 3D computer animation will always be an option, I prefer working with video and 2D images. 3D can be a long and arduous production. Modeling takes time since I can only work in Alias Wavefront Maya for short periods, usually two to three hours, before needing breaks. I aim to practice rigging and animation since problems occurred with the 3D model I created for this project. I will continue to utilize 3D software for future works.

The photographic technique used for A MISSISSIPPI MOAN is my preferred animation technique. Since I enjoy using Adobe Photoshop, editing hundreds of images is not as bothersome as

modeling a 3D character. It is near instantaneous and I am able to have a full rendered animation within hours instead of weeks. I also prefer the look of photographs, which gives a nostalgic quality that is central to A MISSISSIPPI MOAN and my past works. The appearance of 3D can be ridiculously oversimplified. I do not want viewers to be aware of the 3D aspects and detach it from the whole look of the work.

The five-minute experimental work will be screened on mini-DV format. I do intend to upload a compressed version of the work to my web site. I think everyone should have free access to art. I think the work will feature well on the web since its creation was the fusion of many mediums.

In conclusion, the making of A MISSISSIPPI MOAN was a rewarding experience. I value the time spent working with different mediums, which proved costly in time and energy, because I learned which techniques proved worthy of expressing my original vision. My thesis proposal may have changed and evolved, but I remained true to my original idea of water, life, and death. I am proud A MISSISSIPPI MOAN and I believe it is a distinctive and creative work.

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